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Mexico Using Special Squad In Drug War

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MEXICO CITY, April 12 — They include police officers, engineers, doctors, teachers and former soldiers — a select group of men and women between the ages of 23 and 35 from large cities and small villages. At the National Institute of Penal Sciences here, this cross section of Mexican society is being trained as a new elite in the country's stepped-up war against drug trafficking.

By July, about 1,200 of these trainees, a mix of veteran officers and newcomers to police work, are expected to be deployed across Mexico in "special groups" of the Federal Judicial Police. In the months to come, they will be the shock troops commanded by the Mexican Attorney General's newly created Anti-Narcotics Investigation and Operations Division.

The new force is a direct outgrowth of a pledge to step up efforts against drug trafficking made by President Carlos Salinas de Gortari in his inaugural address on Dec. 1.

"I will create a new area in the Attorney General's office dedicated exclusively to its combat, with more personnel and greater training," Mr. Salinas promised. "Narcotics trafficking has become a grave risk to the security of the nation."

Some members of the new force have already been assigned to an anti-drug campaign along the United States-Mexico border, where in recent days they have made some major cocaine seizures and arrests.

Others will soon begin working with the veteran officers involved in the spectacular capture on Saturday of Miguel Angel Félix Gallardo, whom Attorney General Enrique Alvarez del Castillo described this week as the "No. 1 narcotics trafficker" in Mexico.

Government Widens Training

As part of the same effort, the Government is stepping up its recruitment and training in other sections of the Federal Judicial Police, seeking what Fernando Ventura, commander of its Anti-Narcotics Operations, calls the "standardization and homogenization of the force at higher levels."

The current class of police recruits, who reported April 3 for four and a half months of training, includes 112 men and 8 women, more than double the size of previous classes, who were chosen from 2,030 applicants.

Federal police officials say that more than half of the new officers will be thrown directly into the war against drugs. The rest will be assigned to investigate other federal crimes, which range from bank robbery and kidnapping to contraband and illegal possession of arms.

Training in Tough Terrain

The trainee's day begins early, with two hours of demanding exercise and drills. As joggers and dog walkers in the Jalpan Forest watch curiously, they run and crawl through terrain intended to duplicate the conditions they will find in remote and mountainous areas of Sinaloa and Michoacán states, where poppy and marijuana plantings are most common.

"We're a group, and we work together as one!" Mr. Ventura barked when a group of veteran officers, now responding to roll-call in a parking lot, failed to perform to his satisfaction one morning this week. "Here, if you make a mistake, you die."

"In January, we revised our curriculum to give more emphasis to the battle against narcotics, so that more than a third of our material is now devoted to that struggle," said Ernesto Mendieta Jiménez, director of training at the National Institute of Penal Sciences.

Corruption Poses a Problem

Mr. Félix Gallardo was arrested, along with officers of the Federal Highway Police, State Judicial Police and the Attorney General's Office, all of them accused of furnishing him with protection or intelligence in return for bribes.

Aware that corruption has greatly hindered the effectiveness of past drug campaigns, the Government is seeking to insulate the special group, and new recruits in general, from that temptation.

It has not yet been determined how much money members of the task force will earn. But the intention is to "bring their wages more in line with their counterparts in the United States," a senior Mexican law enforcement official said, mentioning a base salary of about \$1,100 a month as the likely figure.

Nevertheless, the Government is counting on something more than what is, by Mexican standards, a very good wage, to motivate the force.

"We've got to instill a mystique, a code, a vocation to serve," said Mr. Ventura, who since January has devoted all his time to training and refresher programs for recruits and veterans.

Spies Detected and Expelled

Mr. Mendieta said that narcotics traffickers, alarmed by the new resolve the Mexican Government has expressed in fighting the drug trade, have tried to infiltrate hirelings into the training program. But these spies were quickly detected and expelled, he added.

To avoid such problems, the special groups are following rigorous recruitment procedures. All the veteran officers have been recommended by their commanders, and both they and the recruits are subjected to physical and psychological tests to determine their fitness and dedication to duty.

"I'm in this out of conviction, not out of obligation," said Ignacio Pérez Orta, a 32-year-old former physical trainer who joined the police four months ago.

"The drug trade is a plague that has to be exterminated one way or another," he said. "If we don't combat it, it will take the reins and we will go down the road Colombia has taken."

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